

PCBs in freshwater clams prompt health warning

By Barbara LaBoe

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Dangerously high levels of PCBs in Columbia River freshwater clams prompted an emergency warning against eating or harvesting them Tuesday.

Columbia River clams have up to 70 times the acceptable level of PCBs in a recent U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study, according to a joint emergency notice issued by the Clark, Cowlitz, Skamania and Wahkiakum county health departments.

Levels were particularly high around the former Vanalco aluminium plant in the Vancouver area, prompting warnings in four area counties.

Harvesting clams from the river is illegal but is known to occur in Cowlitz, Wahkiakum and Clark counties, according to the warning. Because of that warnings in several languages are being posted along the river.

The warning only applies to freshwater clams in the Columbia, not those along the ocean coast.

Known harvesting sites along the Columbia are in Kalama near exit 32 of Interstate 5 as well as Skamokawa in Wahkiakum County. Harvesting also is known to occur in Clark County near the Vanalco plant.

"Eating these clams can have serious health consequences," said Dr. Alan Melnick, health officer for Clark and Skamania counties.

"We are especially concerned about the harvest of these shellfish by people who may speak limited English," added Dr. Mimi Fields, health officer for Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties.

There have been no local reports of people being sickened from the shellfish, Fields said.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are a family of 209 toxic chemical compounds that have potential to cause cancer. They also may cause developmental damage to newborns exposed during pregnancy, according to health officials.

The levels were discovered by the corps, which sampled the Asian freshwater clams that were introduced to the river in the 1970s. The study tested for several toxins and found especially high levels of PCBs in the clams.

While no "safe" PCB level has been determined, people are warned that any seafood with levels of 50 parts per billion should only be eaten once or twice a month.

The corps found PCBs in all clams sampled along a broad stretch of the lower river from Skamokawa to Warrendale, just downstream of Bonneville Dam. PCB levels found near the Vanalco site ranged from 382 to 3,500 parts per billion, according to the health departments. Though levels elsewhere along the river were much lower, health officials still consider them a concern.

The state Department of Ecology will oversee cleanup of the contaminated sediments in the area during the next 18 months, according to the health departments' press release.

Freshwater shellfish are found in most of Washington's streams, rivers and lakes. They are filter feeders and can concentrate toxins, chemicals, bacteria and viruses in their bodies. Because of this the state Department of Fish and Wildlife prohibits all harvesting of freshwater shellfish and can fine people who flout the rule.

To ensure purchased shellfish purchased at food markets comes from an approved source, consumers can check for shellfish tags. Commercial shellfish containers are required to be tagged or labeled by the harvester, including a health certification number, area name and date.

For details about legal recreational shellfish harvesting and restricted areas, visit the state Department of Health website at www.doh.wa.gov/biotxinmaps.htm.